

PURAN SINGH

BALBIR SINGH

TOWARDS the beginning of the twentieth century Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, wrote in one of his letters: 'There is no doubt that a sort of quasi-metaphysical ferment is going on in India, strangely conservative and even reactionary in its general tendency. The ancient philosophies are being exploited; and their modern scribes and professors are increasing in number and fame. What is to come out of this strange amalgam with European ideas thrown as an outside ingredient into the crucible—who can say?'

Round about that time, a senior student in Lahore, Khudadad by name, was studying *The Light of Asia*. A dark shadow of renunciation began to cast its gloom on his mind. Hardy, another gifted student, caught the infection from him. The vision of *Nirvana* loomed large in his mental horizon. Self-sacrifice to save others soon began to exert its compulsive force. Puran Singh, a science student in Japan, began to lead the life of a Buddhist monk in order to realize objectively the essence of 'Abandonment.'

Such was the spell of the book *The Light of Asia*, originally written some eighteen centuries earlier by Asvaghosh and now rendered into English by Edwin Arnold. It was not a textual translation from Sanskrit into a modern language, but some-

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thing more. It was in a way putting the old doctrines into the melting crucible and taking out a crystallised version. In the process of fusion the old script lost its original theological impress and came out as a powerful human document with a universal appeal.

Puran Singh, who in later years would come to be known as one of the greatest Punjabi poets and a pioneer of modern Punjabi literature, was then a young man of twenty-one, going through a hard training in pharmaceutical chemistry in Tokyo. He had in him an element of idealism, a vague melancholy, a moonshine of joy different from the exuberance of healthy objectivity. Physically he was handsome, temperamentally volatile, mentally restless, ready to sacrifice material gains but with an inordinate appetite for fame. He had a voluble tongue, and besides being a vivid conversationist, he had become a public speaker. This facility he acquired when he became Secretary of the Indo-Japanese Club. The more he spoke in public, the more he was in demand and each performance helped to shape him into an orator. On the pulpit he was always restless, and would soar high and open the floodgate of emotion through the imagery of his impassioned speech. As he spoke his words gained momentum and the audience felt the warm impact of glowing sparks.

As a monk all this stood him in good stead. Once in Kyoto he said: '... an old priest offered me a whole pure estate of a Buddhist temple with a beautiful Japanese landscape garden full of plums, cherry and Bamboo trees. But I thought I was too innocent to lead the life of a professional priest.'

The code of discipline for a Buddhist monk in Japan was not so hard as, say, in a Lamasery in Tibet; but the aim was not different, inasmuch as it related to the build-up of metaphysical power through psycho-physical control. It was the influence of the Zen cult that had modified the hardships of monasticism in Japan, but even then Puran Singh felt ill at ease, wrapped within the sacerdotal robe of piety. It was not for him to seek purification through pain. Nor could he be

convinced that the ordinary pleasures of life were positively harmful to the process of cleaning the mind. It was odd for him to fall in line with the thought that popularity and fame perverted the soul, leading it astray from the path of piety. As a matter of fact he felt the other way round. He would experience the cleansing effect of his own talk. While speaking he would flow into a detergent river of words. It is common knowledge that every stream of water carries with it the potentiality of self-purification as it proceeds scrubbing against the atmosphere.

Puran Singh had a large lung capacity. He was an extrovert caught in the ceremonial rigidity that sought to impose the code of a disciplined introvert. It did not succeed. Conversation and lectures became his favourite hobby. He could talk on any subject. There never was any plan in his theme, nor logic or sequence of arguments. The fire of his emotion would fuse the irrelevancy and bestow upon the topic the coherence of a liquid stream of eloquence. Of one speech in Japan he said himself, 'I had made no preparations for my lecture. I went and rose and spoke and thrilled the audience.' Kyoto, according to him, 'was Zen, Osaka, Kobe and Yokohama of Confucius cult, Nikko and Komakura pure Buddhist, Tokyo Taoist.'

It was in Tokyo that he met the great man Okakura. This meeting was fruitful and had enduring effect on him. It provided him with a new guide line. Puran Singh was not searching for *Atman* (Self) through abstract meditation. His pursuit was not knowledge that seeks to transform itself into virtue through stoic restraint. He was not for the mental calm of a *Sunyavadin* that comes through steady comprehension of cosmic vacuum. His quest was for life. He was not so much concerned with the art of making a cup but with the art that fills the cup in such a way that it brims over and spills in perpetual inundation. When he met Okakura, he put him a question. In his words: 'I asked him, what is life? No reply came from the Master of Bijutsuen, the academy of Japanese Art. He sat silent. His Mongolian cheeks grew rosy like those of a blushing Persian maiden, and down rolled

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from his closed eyes the pearl of ecstasy; so time passed in songful silence, till suddenly Okakura seemed to grow large like Mother Nature and to rise from his seat. He uplifted his arms and raised his eyes uttering broken words that still thrill me. "Down from below the mud, rising upward through the turgid waves of the water of Maya upon its stem seated invisible, seeking life from the depths and from heights, the lotus rises higher and higher and yet higher, until its full blossom on the Blue Waters. The glory of the full blossom." And the master closed his eyes again and was silent.'

Puran Singh began to look for the rising buds in the inner pools of the muddle of mind. At that time Japan was going through the process of industrialisation. Scientific education had caught the imagination of the nation. The West was being copied and the blue prints of occidental machinery were being translated into working models. The chimneys were belching smoke. The strangest thing, however, was that whereas imitation was the key to success in the domain of manufacturing processes, the horizon of art was kept pure. No imitation could pass the threshold. The dividing line between the East and the West was sharp and distinct. It was really the Western artist who first noted the distinction. Men like Okakura were laying the emphasis that Nature is a raw material. It is only a source, a stuff, a stimulus, an incentive. The artist has not to copy it. He has to impose his own heart-beat on his creation. It is this subjective approach to nature flowing from the painter's brush that imparts the ecstasy of his mood to his creation and makes it original.

Puran Singh's mind was enriched with these Eastern traditions. In a very original but diffused way he began to express himself. Later in life his thoughts were crystal clear as can be seen from the following examples of his writing: 'I love to see the brush of the wind painting cloud figures in the sky', or 'I love all shapes—be they of brass or gold or stone or chalk—only they should bear in them the touches of the chisel of my master.'

He expressed himself more aptly when he attained matu-

rity. His own inner rhythm was fully asserting itself when he wrote: 'Life interests the artist, and not the dead conceptions of it—the face of the man more than the sparkles of diamond—And his Art converts the Universe into the Deity of the Temple of his heart.... Art-creations in marble, and in colours, the flower and the fruit, become in the hands of artists a beautiful alphabet which has its full meaning only when it spells the name of the Beloved.'

While talking of art Puran Singh thinks that it is the element of feeling which is a check from within that saves art from imitation. 'Feeling', he says, 'is all in all. Man is conceived as feeling in flesh, as divine act in flesh; as God's word in flesh. And while feeling creates its own new form, imitation cannot. Imitation is like making dead statues of marble. It is of no interest to artist or the Guru. Imitation is repetition that has no meaning.'

But imitation, he concedes, can also be useful. He says, 'Imitation has its uses in schools as forms of training, but that constitutes no grand expression of the Divine inspiration.'

About originality he is very positive. One has to be original to the extent where imitation even of oneself should be avoided: 'The bold and astonishing originality as I have said—the man-transmuting, age-transmuting originality—is the first sign of the true artist. Mr Okakura is rightfully bitter against imitation when he says, "Imitation whether of nature, of the old masters or above all of self is suicidal to the realization of the individuality, which rejoices always to play an original part, be it of tragedy or comedy in the grand drama of life of man or Nature."'

The Indo-Japanese Club in Tokyo proved very congenial to his genius. It gave him not only a stage for dress rehearsals of his eloquence, but also art, literature and philosophy. Again, it was here that he came in contact with Swami Rama Tirath. The meeting with the Swami was a turning point in his life. 'It was in 1902', wrote Puran Singh, 'he (the Swami) was on board bound for Japan,. He was the guest of Messrs Wassiamall Assomall at Yokohama for a day on his arrival in Japan. The following day with a companion

from the said firm he arrived at Tokyo, and entered the house known as the Indo-Japanese Club of which I was the Secretary, and lived with other Indian students as a resident member of the Club. As the man from the Yokohama introduced two orange-robed monks into the Club, a thrill of joy went round. I had gone almost mad with enthusiasm, though I knew neither of them. Their language was all so strange and flow all so spiritual that it commanded silent obeisance. The younger Swami (Swami Narain) asked me, "where is your country?" I replied with tears in my eyes in soft loving accent, "The world is my country." And the elder Swami (Swami Rama) looked up into my eyes and said, "To do good is my religion." Thus we met each other in two sentences.'

The meeting with Swami Rama was not of the nature of a confluence of souls. It was like a juicy graft dovetailed on to a living stock with its own root system. Swami Ram, who was a Vedantist, openly declared himself a Buddhist. In one of his lectures he said: 'The religion that Rama brings to Japan is virtually the same as was brought centuries ago by Buddha's followers but the same religion requires to be dealt with from an entirely different standpoint to suit the needs of the present age. It requires to be blazoned forth in the light of Western science and philosophy.'

A somewhat similar statement was also made by Okakura, who had declared, 'Asia is one', knowing how under the influence of Buddhism the whole continent once rallied round one ideology.

The stay of Swami Rama in Japan was very short. He went away to America the same year (1902), from where he returned to India in 1905, to die a year later. In Japan Swami Rama created a great impression. His lectures, though in idealistic vein, had a subdued practical tone, and his approach was pragmatic. After his lecture on the 'secret of success' in the Tokyo College of Commerce he met Puran Singh and told him in the most affectionate manner, 'I came (to Japan) not for the Parliament of Religions, but to guide Puran', to which Puran Singh's reaction was: 'And I forthwith became a clean shaven monk in love for him and

not of anything he taught, for I understood then nothing of that, and I am not sure I understand everything now.'

When Swami Rama went to Japan he had a definite mission. He was to address an International Congress in Tokyo to be named 'Parliament of Religions' after the style and fashion of Chicago in 1893, which made Vivekananda famous. But he had to leave Japan before the Tokyo scheme could mature. When Puran Singh met him again in India, after three years, he found him 'clad in an orange-coloured blanket, and he met me impersonally, made me sit by him as he started, and there was a flash of light from his eyes as he said, "Sacrifice will secure the freedom of this country." Rama's head must go, then Puran's, then of a hundred others before the country can be free. India, Mother India, must be free.'

One can appreciate the concern of Lord Curzon, who became apprehensive of this quasi-metaphysical ferment in India.

During his three years' stay in Japan Puran Singh had become a different person. He learnt science and industry in the academic and technical laboratories in Japan, built mostly in imitation of the German system. He also imbibed the spirit of Japanese art. When he returned to India in 1903, he had with him a certificate of higher education in science. He had also with him a bundle of blue prints of distillation units and pharmaceutical machinery. Besides this, he had the distinctive originality of an artist, and could consider himself a great orator. He still wore the ochre-dyed mantle against which his beautiful face gleamed with sunshine.

He was now faced with a problem: what should he do, what was his profession? It is said of Socrates that once on a sea voyage he was captured by pirates and sold as a slave in Crete. A Corinthian named Xeniades bought him and asked him his trade. Socrates replied that he knew no trade except that of governing men, and that he would like to be resold to a man who needed a master. Xeniades made him a tutor of his two sons in Corinth.

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Like Socrates Puran Singh wanted, though unconsciously, to be sold as a slave to someone who needed a master. That was the riddle of his life. He was restless. A woman was waiting for him. She needed a master who may be bound to her in perfect loyalty as a slave. That woman was Maya Devi, his wedding with whom took place in less than six months of his arrival in India. How this was brought about has been narrated by his biographers in detail. However, when he agreed to the marriage proposal he did not realise its inconsistency with the orthodox tenets of *Sanyas*. He honestly thought that the woman would also go about with beggar's bowl as a mendicant with him. Though things did not happen that way physically, they were not different in essence. The wife gave him such sympathy, love and devotion that very soon his tormented and sensitive soul felt her presence tenderly soothing. It is in this context that his following poem should be read :

I sought Him in pain, He turned upon me and said, 'I am pleasure'. I sought Him in pleasure, He turned upon me and said, 'I am pain.' In renunciation He came and whispered, 'I do not live in forests, I live in pearl palaces.' When I was in palaces, He said, 'Go and find me in the forest.' When I turned my back on woman, He laughed at me and said, 'Seest thou not, I am the beautiful Woman.'

After an unsettled life from 1903 to 1907 Puran Singh was appointed a Forest Chemist in Dehra Dun in 1908, a position he continued to hold till 1919, though under different designations. Till 1912 his literary output was negligible. He started a paper from Lahore, *The Thundering Dawn*, and edited it for about a year. Then after the death of Swami Rama (1906), he wrote a comprehensive introduction to his works collected and published by Master Amir Chand (1908), who was later convicted and hanged in the Delhi conspiracy case. It was during this period that he came across Dr. Khudadad (1905) who lived with him, and met Lala Hardy and J.M. Chatterji. The last named person, still alive and living

in Dehra Dun, was initiated into the revolutionary activities by Hardyal and had connection with Ras Behari Bose, the famous revolutionary who threw a bomb on Lord Hardinge. Bose was a Head Clerk in Dehru Dun's Forest College and purloined the explosive material from Puran Singh's laboratory.

Although Puran Singh was also a revolutionary in his own way, his views on nationalism were different. He had told Swami Rama in Japan that the world was his country, while revolutionaries who met him in India—and there were many of them—had territorial limits.

In 1912 Puran Singh went to Sialkot to attend the 5th Sikh Educational Conference, which was presided over by H.H. Maharaja of Patiala. There he met the saint-poet Bhai Vir Singh, already much esteemed, who in course of time would exert a profound influence on him. Writing on his first meeting with Bhai Vir Singh, he observed: 'Having seen him, I realise how the touch of the foot of the great Rama freed the imprisoned Ahalya.' Puran Singh addressed the Conference in English first and then, due to the persistent demand of the audience, in Punjabi. This was the first time he was using Punjabi as a medium of public utterance, and though his Punjabi accent sounded a bit strange and occasionally he fumbled for words, his oratory was greatly applauded.

In 1912 Puran Singh was just 33 years of age. His genius was ripe and his language, losing some of its turgidity, had acquired a greater natural flow. His thinking had also undergone an appreciable change. So far, the guiding principle in his life was aesthetics. What Goethe said once—'the beautiful is more than good for it includes the good'—was the motto of his youth. But now art seemed to him not the final thing, but a raw material for something else which he wanted to call 'inspiration'. He thus added a mystic note to his expression, and this became the passion of the rest of his life. This vision, if it was one, transformed the tone and spiritual character of all his later poems. Under the impact of this vision he realized that 'without inspiration nothing

is true; with inspiration all is true.' And again: 'All is oneself, one soul, but inspiration is self-realisation which is infinite; and not feeble self-perfections and self-satisfactions on one dead level, in one miserable moment.'

This now became the salient point of his new aesthetics, which he affirmed repeatedly in different ways. He relegated art, which used to be his primary pursuit, to a secondary position with this assertion: 'There is no religion, nor Art without His inspiration'. Elaborating the theme, he argued: 'It is when inspiration has left us that religion assumes the form of ethics, philanthropy, humanity, churches, mosques and temples, hospitals and orphanages, because inspiration needs no such crutches.... Man needs no ropes around his neck, only animals need to be chained down. The dead and ethical codes of categorical imperatives are ropes for the animals, because men always follow the supreme law of their own being.'

As a scientifically trained man, Puran Singh had to accept the position that ideas are true only when they can be verified and corroborated. Yet his inspirational approach to experience gave him the power to assimilate ideas owing their origin to imagination. But there was always a concrete content to his fantasy, as opposed to the mental abstraction leading to the metaphysical void. He remained throughout his life changeful, fluid and active. He has been accused of being not consistent. This judgment springs from the ordinary pedestrian notion of uprightness. To him the very act of living resolves and assimilates all contradictions, as he said once: 'Sitting in this supreme light and bliss I contradict myself, this moment contradicts the next. I am an eternity at all the diamond-points of space and time.'

Yet there is no denying the fact that in his life there were maladjustments, and numerous irritations. Moreover, being fashioned as if out of some mercurial clay, he was always emotionally highstrung. Speaking about himself, he once confessed: 'I always loved to be alive with passion of one kind or another. Always explosive and volcanic at times, when I swept everything before me.' For Maya

Devi, his wife, it must have been a strain to live with such a genius. Mrs. Carlyle once remarked: 'Let no woman, who loves the peace of soul, should ever marry an author.' Puran Singh was more Carlylean than Carlyle in this respect. He was conscious of the strain he might have caused his wife, and dedicating his *Seven Baskets of Prose Poems* to her, wrote: 'To my companion of these flying days on this earth, Shrimati Maya Devi Ji, in grateful acknowledgement of the priceless love she offered me and with which she soothed me in my troubles on the life's path by her daily crucifixion for me in noble silence of her soul.'

This was in 1928, the year of economic difficulties and disillusionments about the Rosha Grass Farm, his great financial and industrial adventure. As already said, Puran Singh's life from 1907 to 1919 was spent as a chemist attached to Forest College, Dehra Dun. He did research in essential oils that led to the establishment of Turpentine industry in India. He perfected the method of distilling camphor, by devising a specially adapted double surface condenser which is still preserved in the College as a museum piece. He worked in collaboration with Pearson, the economist, on the Rosha Grass oil, a minor forest product, to determine its chemical and economic data. He had great hopes about the Rosha Grass and eventually established a farm at Shiekh-pura with the sole objective of making this grass an effective and acceptable agricultural proposition. This venture was not a success, financially or otherwise, and in the end it caused him not only physical exhaustion but acute mental frustration.

At the farm it was only the occupation with literature which gave him some genuine satisfaction. The Punjabi books he wrote in the farm offer glimpses of the rural Punjab. His verse and prose—whose style was a departure from all established conventions—created a new epoch in Punjabi literary style. Most of his books in English, written earlier, were published in England, where they failed to evoke enthusiastic response. The English public on the whole lacks the

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spiritual sensitivity, which is very necessary for an appreciative understanding of Puran Singh's mind.

My intimate personal association with Puran Singh began in 1915. For a number of years we lived together in the same house in Dehra Dun. When he finally became ill—he was suffering from galloping Phthisis—it fell on me to arrange for the treatment. Though he put up a great fight, he was sinking fast, but he continued to be all sweetness to everyone around him. Only one day he showed his anger. A friend had written beseeching him to seek the healing blessings of a particular saint, which greatly perturbed him. He called me to say something, but his voice was inaudible. When I put my ears close to his lips, he said: 'For the sake of this flesh, no, never.' He then fell into a swoon, from which he awoke after an hour. Within two days of this incident he expired on March 31, 1931.

To hear him say while facing death 'For the sake of this flesh, no, never' was an experience. It was a challenge. It amounted to his saying: 'O Death, where is thy sting! O Grave, where is thy victory'!